

Northern California Branch

AMERICAN SOCIETY FOR MICROBIOLOGY

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Mr. R. W. Sarber
Editor, ASM News
115 Huron View Boulevard
Ann Arbor, Michigan

Dear Editor,

Biological warfare and the ASM's Committee Advisory to the US Army Biological Laboratories have been subjects of recent discussion (ASM News August 1967 pp. 12, 17, 20-21). In that light we think it appropriate to inform you of a special meeting of the Northern California Branch held November 11, 1967. Participating as panalists were Gen. J. H. Rothschild, (US Army ret.), Dr. James Moulder, Dr. Joshua Lederberg, Dr. William P. Romig, Dr. Allen G. Marr, and Dr. Alvin J. Clark.

Biological warfare is the use of microorganisms or their toxic products "intentionally disseminated to reduce the military effectiveness of man. It also includes the defense against these things," said Gen. Rothschild. He continued: "There's no question of the ability to infect men with biological agents which are released miles away from them. The only question which has not been determined by large scale tests is what proportion of the target personnel would be infected." The agents may have lethal or incapacitating effects. In general microorganisms when used militarily differ from their toxic products or chemicals in that the symptoms they cause are relatively tardy in appearing, cause a relatively longer period of disability, and can be disseminated over relatively larger areas (i.e. "tens of thousands of

square miles"). Microorganisms, their toxic products and other chemical agents are relatively humane if compared with explosive or trauma weapons in that, exclusive of the lethal agents, they cause less suffering, a smaller percentage of long-term disability, and a lower mortality.

Criticizing the implication that policies on research and development of biological and chemical weapons should be similar, Dr. Lederberg pointed out the special hazard to the human species of microorganisms as weapons by saying that "...the calculated growth of the capacity for biological warfare is inherently a suicidal activity on the part of human beings.

Its exactly in opposition to what so much of our scientific and technical and human effort has been for the control of pestilence, to try to bring about ways in which [pestilence] can be systematically disseminated."

(emphasis added) As one illustration of the hazard, he mentioned the use of an organism which normally possesses a marginal degree of incapacitation and has been rendered resistant to sunlight or antibiotics for military purposes. Such an organism when disseminated on a large scale might evolve to the point of creating a decimating pandemic.

Gen. Rothschild maintained that civilian advisory groups, like the ASM Advisory Committee, operating within the limits of military secrecy, review policies and procedures adequately and thereby reduce the dangers of escalating the effort in biological warfare. Dr. Lederberg argued that civilian review should be performed by the scientific community as a whole with exception perhaps to be made only upon proof by the military of the need for secrecy. Small committees operating within the strictures of secrecy are limited not only by the particular competence of their members but also by the very narrow realm of criticism considered appropriate by the military.

The ASM's Advisory Committee was described by Dr. Moulder as "a panel of once-a-year, hopefully expert consultants who are consulted on basic scientific programs at Fort Detrick and professional problems related to microbiologists at Fort Detrick. To my knowledge, and again [Dr. Romig] may correct me, [the Committee has] not been consulted on general policy and the Committee has not been consulted on the development of specific biological weapons." (emphasis added) Dr. Romig agreed in the main with Dr. Moulder's description but indicated that about one-third of the time spent by the Committee concerns security matters and that this is reflected in their report to the Scientific Director of Fort Detrick.

The description by Dr. Romig and Dr. Moulder of the limited activities of ASM's Advisory Committee contrasted with the role implied for the Committee by Gen. Rothschild's remark that civilian advisory committees were given "complete disclosure of everything we have" and were well-briefed to be influential in policy matters. Gen. Rothschild stated that Fort Detrick has civilian advisory committees other than that from the ASM. "Some of these committees meet alot more often....For instance one of our major committees...met about every other month," he said.

Since other committees provide the bulk of the scientific advice to Fort Detrick, the function of the ASM committee was questioned. Dr. Moulder commented that the Committee "is merely the instrument that is served to remind us of our own personal involvement as scientists, microbiologists, as person, [and] the involvement of the Society in all the problems arising from the clear possibility of infectious agents being used as weapons." He also commented: "I think almost all microbiological research has something to do with biological warfare because unfortunately all the problems

of biological warfare are intertwined in a very complex way with the problems of understanding and controlling infectious disease." D

Dr. Lederberg also commented on this subject: "Most of us did not go into science with the expectation of supporting munitions activities.... [many biologists] feel that they had not elected to go into a line of work that would contribute to the destruction of other people, whether it is less ^{or} ~~of~~ more humane than other techniques."

During the general discussion it was suggested that the Advisory Committee be retained to express ASM policy decisions. This idea was regarded as unrealistic by Dr. Moulder and Dr. Marr who thought that policy advice was misdirected when aimed at Fort Detrick.

Another suggestion was that the present Advisory Committee be retained to offer technical advice and that some other instrument of ASM decisions on biological warfare policy be established. This idea met several objections, one being that the Army would continue to exploit the ASM by using the Society's link with Fort Detrick to lend the Fort a sense of acceptability and hence to fend off protests of biological warfare research by US citizens. It was pointed out that the ASM has no legal obligation to advise the US Army and that the international character of the ASM made it possible for a link with the Army to prove embarrassing if the Mexican or Brazilian Armies asked the ASM for advice in biological warfare efforts through the Mexican or Rio de Janeiro Branches. Also retention of the present Advisory Committee would not meet the most frequently heard objections that only ASM members deemed acceptable to the Scientific Director of the US Army Biological Laboratories and able to obtain security clearance are eligible for membership on the Advisory Committee and that the conclusions of the deliberations of the Advisory Committee are not made available to the ASM membership.

Still another suggestion was to promote international agreements on a policy of non-secrecy in microbiological research perhaps through the Pugwash Conference. Dr. Lederberg indicated that such efforts could be successful because as yet biological weapons are not major weapons and our national security does not depend crucially on secrecy of our activities in biological warfare.

Finally it was suggested that the ASM should foster and stimulate open discussion of biological warfare policies and procedures.

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